

Paws

The rising sun cut the edge of rooftops polishing stucco walls with a silver sheen the length of the narrow cobblestone alley. Rusty hinges cried when a metal door kicked open, a silhouette emerged with a trashcan slung over a shoulder, ambled a few feet and emptied it into a dumpster. Everything in Clay's life was ritual, even taking out the trash. He turned to go back inside when a rat scurried out of a box behind the pizza shop and ran between two legs propped into a scrawny body leaning against the wall on the other side of the alleyway. He took a few steps and stared at untied laces that spiraled a backpack placed between two big feet. A kid peeked up through long black strands of hair, then wrapped his arms around his legs and buried his head between his knees.

“Jesus Christ, kid,” said Clay, followed by the hesitation of a man searching for the rest of a thought, “they the biggest goddamn hands I ever seen.”

Legs squatted against his chest, the kid stretched his fingers and looked at his open palms like an infant discovering his hands for the first time.

“You ever box?”

The iron trellises of the el quaked as the 5:45 pulled into the Manayunk station a few blocks away. “L-like fight?”

Clay glared at the kid thinking he was making fun of his own laggard speech.

“What'd you say, punk?”

The kid buried his head back in his knees and tightened his arms around them for cover. “B-box?” came a muffled voice from inside the cave, and he blinked furiously when he peeked. “L-like fight?”

Clay had seen the defensive posture before from opponents who cowered in the corner of the ring. And he was familiar with the nervous blinking of kids who’d taken too many beatings, in this case at the hands of a stepfather who’d pull punches and laugh, just for kicks.

“Yeah,” said Clay, dialing back his edge. “Box.”

The kid lowered his eyes and shook his head *no*.

“Come on,” he said, and turned back toward the door.

Backpack slung over his bony shoulder, the kid scraped his sneakers on uneven stone as he tailed Clay up the alley. Three steps inside the back door of the building, he stopped and looked around. Heavy bags hung from the ceiling like sides of beef in a meatpacking house, speed bags were spaced six feet apart along the wall, uppercut bags on the opposite wall, round punching bags suspended between ceiling and floor with thick rubber straps. Barbells and medicine balls were strewn across mats. Tangles of jump ropes looped over hooks like angle hair. A boxing ring sat under a dangling light bulb in the center of the gym.

Clay bowled the trashcan across the floor slamming it into the wall outside an office. “Throw your stuff over there,” he said, motioning to intermittent folding chairs that lined the ring. The kid tossed the backpack on a chair and followed Clay to a heavy bag. “What’s your name?”

“G-gerald,” he said.

Clay winced. “Hmm, we’re gonna have to do something about that.”

Gerald wore a questioning look. The only other names he’d ever been called were *boy* by his stepfather, and *faggot* by the kids in school who said his hands were big from pulling on his cock. Now, somehow, he was inside a boxing gym with a black man built like a miniature tank who wanted to give him a different name.

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Ozzie Crenshaw’s gym was old school—leather, iron, the stench of sweat and stale Lysol—a place Clay called home. People who trained at Ozzie’s thought Clay was a hanger-on who fixed the toilet, kept the locker room clean, and emptied the trash. They figured Clay was short for Clayton or Claiborne, or some other name that originated in the South. The clientele was diverse, from students of the sport with dreams to one day turn pro to wannabes looking for an ego boost, the type who’d roll up their windows and lock their car doors when they drove through the Glenwood neighborhood of North Philly where Clay learned to fight.

The creased leather skin of Clay’s bald skull added decades to his appearance. Nobody could ever have pictured him the timid kid who walked into a rec center twenty-five years ago after his foster father beat him and unleashed his rage on a heavy bag the old timer who managed the place kept in a storeroom. Clay took an immediate liking to the cleansing sensation of perspiration pouring from his body and came back every day after school, training until his body turned to rock. The old man took a liking to him, taught him about timing on a speed bag fastened to a piece of plywood that Clay hit for hours, day after day, until the rhythm of his punches sounded like Elvin Ray Jones banging it out on the drums with the John Coltrane Quartet.

Damn near all of Glenwood came to his first Golden Gloves fight when he was fifteen. They cheered nervously while a more experienced boxer pounded him in the first round, but the guy ran out of gas in the second and Clay beat him into submission in the third. After the win, he jacked up his training routine, running the Wissahickon trails in Fairmount Park carrying weights, and jumping rope to the cadence with the click-clack of the Broad Street subway. He developed a ballet-style prance, gliding around the ring ducking jabs and dodging hooks before delivering a lights-out uppercut.

Clay turned pro at eighteen and skyrocketed through the ranks, fighting six bouts a year compared to most boxers two. Louie Fritz, a downtown bookie, decreed that he'd risen through the ranks too fast and ordered him to take a dive in the sixth round of a fight that would've put him in the upper echelon of the welterweight division. The sixth round! The time in the contest after Clay's body had cooked in the kiln of the early rounds, the point at which he'd launch flurries of combinations and score points so fast the judge could barely keep count. He became the first boxer to stand toe-to-toe with Clyde Jones in the final rounds of a fight. He won a split decision costing Fritz fifty grand. After the fight Fritz's three hundred pound enforcer nicknamed Hoagie Cheese waited in the alley behind the arena with orders to send Clay a message. Hoagie showed up at the corner the next day with a broken nose.

Clay taunted fighters at the top of the ranks in the media. Tito Miguel, a welterweight contender with a deadly right, took the bait and challenged him. The fight went back and forth for five rounds, and in the sixth the two fighters stood toe-to-toe exchanging blows. Clay let loose with a relentless flurry of combinations, punishing Tito against the ropes before landing a right uppercut that lifted him off his feet and sent him

to the canvas. Clay raised his hands in victory and started back to his corner, but saw his manager waving his arms and shaking his head. He was incredulous when he turned back around and Tito was on his feet after a nine count. The referee gestured to resume the fight and Clay drove him into a corner with rapid-fire lefts and rights until Tito's gloves dropped to his side, defenseless. Clay looked at the referee, pleading for him to stop the fight, but the ref ignored him. Deafening screams came from the bloodthirsty crowd, and Clay landed his final punch.

On the verge of a welterweight title bout, Clay moped around the gym, trained halfheartedly, faked injuries and came up with excuse after excuse not to fight. Weeks stretched to months, months to years, and when it became clear that Clay would never box again, his manager hooked him up with Ozzie, a former heavyweight who'd just opened a gym in Manayunk.

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Clay had no interest in being a trainer, wouldn't even know where to begin, just figured he'd show the kid a few moves he'd learned from his fighting days. He stripped off his sweatshirt, leaving the cotton fabric of his white tee fall over the chiseled corners of his muscles, cupped his hands at the sides of his head, and said, "Get em up." Gerald put up his hands tentatively, and when he glanced toward the backdoor there was a sudden smack on the side of his head. "Never lower your hands in a gym," said Clay. Gerald's attention snapped back to the dipped shoulder pointing directly at him, bobbing left, weaving right. Clay nodded for him to follow his motions; they were stiff, mechanical. "Loosen up," he said, and with each bob the kid mirrored, and weave he mimicked, he swooped a little deeper, rotated wider.

Clay walked to the other side of the gym and stopped at a heavy bag. “Watch,” he said, and launched a straight left. “You step into a jab, snap your fist, aim high like the other guy’s bigger than you.”

Gerald’s muscles tensed at the sound of Clay’s fists slamming leather when he broke into a flurry of jabs. He watched the boxer, but saw his stepfather looking up at him from beating his mother on the kitchen floor, blood spurting from the ear he split open with a flower vase he grabbed off the windowsill, a recurring vision since regaining consciousness an hour after the drunk busted his jaw.

“Throw a jab,” said Clay, head pointing at the bag. Gerald looked at his hands as if wondering whether their size was the reason the fighter was interested in him. “Go ahead,” prodded Clay. Gerald threw halfhearted jab and Clay’s head dropped like dead weight. He stepped back in front of him, and said, “Like this,” and uncorked another jab. Gerald tried to copy his technique, and when he heard his own glove smack leather, he threw a second, a third, and then a half-dozen more.

Clay backed away to widen the space between them and threw a left-right into an imaginary opponent. “That’s what you call a combination,” he said, motioning for the kid to try it on the bag. Next he taught him the proper way to throw a hook, an uppercut; always keeping his instructions short, simple sound bites. “Rotate your feet. Shift your weight.”

Clay led him to a speed bag and put on an exhibition. He gestured for Gerald try, and watched him miss more times than he hit it. He stopped him, showed him once more, this time hitting the bag slowly, methodically, counting one-two-three, one-two-three. “Don’t try to kill it. Work on timing.” He stood back and watched, and after few minutes

he took him by the arm to a bag suspended between the floor and ceiling with thick black rubber straps. Clay pointed for him to hit it and moved aside while Gerald swung wildly at mostly air, cursing the bag. “Settle down,” Clay laughed. “Nobody hits a double-end bag the first time. He extended his arm and touched the bag with his closed fist. “Watch,” he said, and hit the bag with short jabs, then a series of jabs, left-right combinations, over and over. “Short punches until you find a rhythm. Always a rhythm.”

Daylight shot through the front door and a guy wearing a red hoodie came in. He raised his head toward Clay and walked in the direction of the locker room. A few minutes later the door opened again. This time a large man strolled across the floor and disappeared into the office. “Boss is here,” said Clay. “Time to pack up.”

Gerald dropped his arms and stared at coach. Sensing dejection, Clay said, “Come with me,” and started toward the office. Ozzie looked up at the knock on his open door seeming surprised to see Clay with a young man. Hand rested on the kid’s shoulder, he said, “Ozzie, meet my friend, Gerald.” Ozzie looked the kid up and down as he stood, took his hands in his own and turned them over. “Whoa!” he blurted, “Look at the size of these paws!”

“That’s it!” said Clay.

Gerald and Ozzie both looked at Clay. “That’s what?” said Ozzie.

“Paws. That’s what we’ll call him.”

“Yeahhh,” said Ozzie, long and drawn, nodding his agreement. He winked at the kid, and said, “Stick with Coach, Paws. He’ll teach you to do things the right way.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Paws.

Ozzie watched Clay walk out of the office, arm looped around Paws, looking more energized than he had since his fighting days. He shook his head, and said, “Well, I’ll be.”

Out in the alley, Paws asked Clay if he would be at the gym in the morning.

“Don’t you go to school?” asked Clay.

“I’m done being pushed around.”

Clay chewed on the kid’s words thinking about where he grew up. He learned at an early age to bust someone in the face before they bust you, even if they were two feet taller. It was called survival. “You can be done getting pushed around and still go to school,” he said.

Paws looked at Coach for a few long seconds. “Okay, Coach,” he said.

Clay nodded. “Alright then. I’ll see you tomorrow, six sharp.”

Paws stood at the end of the alley staring at Pretzel Park on the other side of Cresson Street, the shortcut to school. He crossed and stopped at the uneven stone staircase leading to the entrance, then looked to his right at St. John the Baptist church at the top of the hill, a two-minute detour to avoid a place where he had his nose broken two years ago. The iron trellises running the length of Cresson Street shook under a passing train. He turned and started up the hill toward St. John.

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Paws shielded his eyes from light that shot out when the door cracked open. He followed Clay inside and tossed his backpack on a chair, stripped off his sweatshirt and started loosening up, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, craning his neck from side to side.

Clay waved him to the mat where they stood in silence looking at one another. Creases formed in Paws' forehead, waiting, not sure what to do or say. Suddenly, Clay dropped to the floor. Paws had no choice but to fall across from him and mirror his coach's exercises: crunches, variation of crunches, feet six inches off the ground, scissors, bicycles alternating knees to elbows. "Over," ordered Clay, and they rotated onto their hands and did push-ups until he yelled, "Plank," and the two assumed a plank position for thirty seconds. "Left," and they shifted to a one-arm plank. "Right!"

When they finished calisthenics, Clay grabbed a pair of sparring gloves off a shelf and threw them to Paws. He set a timer for three minutes, the length of a boxing round, and started Paws hitting a heavy bag until the buzzer sounded. The thirty seconds between rounds, Clay drove Paws to do sit-ups, push-ups, or jumping jacks until the next round started. After a second round on the heavy bag he moved to the speed bag for two rounds, next the uppercut bag, then the double-end bag. The breaks between rounds were not breaks at all. Jumping rope followed the punching bags, again for three-minute rounds with no break, just jumping, sweating, panting, but never slowing.

Clay stood watching Paws after the second round of jumping rope. "Don't you ever get tired?" he asked. Paws smiled while sweat pooled on the cement at his feet. A glimmer came to the coach's eyes.

Days stretched to weeks. Clay incorporated drills focused on coordination and timing. Some days he concentrated on footwork, making Paws side-shuffle from one end of the gym to the other, and if he tripped, he'd yell, "Don't cross your feet!" always keeping him from developing bad habits.

The third Monday of training, Clay added more drills to the end of the workout. He called them the Zoo Keeper—gorilla walk, bear crawl, and crab crawl, each designed to walk gloved-fisted on all-fours, frontwards, backwards, sideways, before assuming a plank position, rising into a push-up—plank, push-up, plank, push-up, up-down, up-down. Thinking he'd finally pushed Paws to exhaustion, he yelled, "Burpees!" making him thrust his feet into a squatted position and jump toward the ceiling, and just when he was about to collapse, Clay screamed, "Five more!" After the fifth burpee, Paws did one more in defiance, then folded, forearms on knees, sucking air, a puddle of sweat beneath him. Seconds later he straightened. Clay stood in front of him with his arm extended. "Give it to me," he said, and they bumped fists.

Clay scrapped the Zoo Keeper for a pair of padded mitts at the end of the third week of training. He set the timer, slid the mitts over his hands, and raised them chest-high. "Let me see what you got," he said, and led Paws around the gym catching his jabs, combos, hooks, and uppercuts, and after two rounds, he put his arm around Paws' shoulder. "Next week we spar."

Paws lowered his head and said nothing.

"I thought you'd be excited," said Clay. He watched his student, waiting for him to say something. "What's up Paws?" he finally asked.

"Don't get me wrong, Coach," he said in a soft voice. "I love working out, but..." his voice tailed off, seconds passed before he lifted his head back up. "I don't like violence," he said apologetically.

The pain Clay saw in Paws' face hurt him more than any punch he'd ever taken. He never had a choice about liking violence when he was a kid being roughed-up by thugs twice his age, or having a blade pulled on him in the school bathroom in fourth grade. His best friend didn't have a choice when he was shot dead standing next to him outside a convenience store when they were twelve. Now he was training a scared kid who could outwork anyone in the gym, but wasn't a fighter. "Who said anything about violence?" asked Clay.

"Boxing is violent," he said. "When I'm hitting the bag I feel like I could kill someone."

Clay's head slumped. He looked down at his lethal hands, his final punch, and saw the life draining from Tito Miguel, the nightmare that ended his boxing career. He dealt with his grief by retreating from the ring, but never filled the void left by his love of the sport. Unconsciously, he started to sway, and just as stealthily, he eased into a bob and weave. Paws watched curiously.

"Hit me," said Clay, barely audible.

Paws stared at him through uncertain eyes. "What?"

Clay poked him lightly with his glove. "Gimme your best shot."

Paws shook his head *no*.

Clay stuck out his chin. "Because you can't," he said, with a hint of a smile.

Probing Clay's playful expression, Paws threw a dispirited jab that Clay swatted like a fly. "I said, 'Hit me,'" he taunted. Unwittingly, Paws found himself swept into the dance. His second jab was quicker but missed coach by six inches. Clay dropped his gloves, bobbed his head in and out, left to right, shuffled his feet Ali style. He pointed to

his chin and Paws threw a determined combo that whizzed past Clay's head and caused him to lose his balance. Clay leaned into him to keep him from falling, then pushed off separating them. They waltzed the room like ballroom dancers. "Boxing is art," said Clay. "It's rhythm and jazz." Paws tapped his gloves together, popped a left-right combination that Clay blocked. They circled left, then right, launching jabs, combinations, hooks, uppercuts. Clay raised a glove and touched the side of his head. "Boxing conditions the mind, as much as the body. It's a test of smarts and will." He came to a gradual stop and lowered his gloves. "Standing your ground is an act of self-respect. Defending yourself is honorable." Close enough to feel his student breathing, Clay looked him in the eye. "Guys who fight their way though life get old before their time. The grind of battling the world tears them down. You have to find balance." He tapped his head against Paws' chest. "Balance gets you through the long run."

Paws looked down at coach, as if realizing for the first time he was a head taller than him. He nodded, and repeated, "Balance."

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Hands resting on the ropes at his sides, Paws stared across the ring with anticipation that had been building since Clay told him Friday that they'd spar this week. Coach motioned him to center ring, and said, "Just move around. Throw a few jabs. Settle into a rhythm." Paws adjusted his headgear, nodded, and went back to his corner.

The timer sounded and they approached one another, tapped gloves, and started circling the ring. Paws danced on the balls of his feet, threw a left jab that missed, then a left-right combination that Clay blocked. Clay countered with a jab that glanced Paws' headgear, a second that he ducked and came back with a jab of his own that missed. Paws

moved his shoulders in and out, circled in one direction, then the other. He threw another jab that Clay blocked with a glove; a follow-up caught his shoulder. Paws lowered his gloves shoulder-high and Clay landed a quack jab in the center of his headgear that jolted him. “Never lower your guard,” he ordered. Paws shook it off and responded with a left-right combination. Clay nodded his approval and just as quickly hurled a flurry of punches that demonstrated speed as a weapon. Paws landed another glancing blow to the shoulder. Clay angled his body making himself a small target, then became elusive and frustrated him. He backed Paws into a corner and unleashed combinations of soft jabs and hooks. Another lesson. The timer sounded and they went to their corners. Paws was breathing hard, but recovered quickly. Sixty seconds later the timer went off for the next round.

At the end of round two, Clay patted Paws on the arm, and said, “That was a good first session.”

Student shook his head. “One more.”

Coach smiled. “Okay. One more.”

Paws came out for round three more confident and determined. He flowed left, then right and threw a combination. Then another. Jab, jab, jab. Jab, hook. Jab, hook, uppercut. He didn’t connect often, but he didn’t get frustrated. He persisted—dancing, bobbing, weaving, jabbing. He juked his head making Clay miss, and he smiled. So did Clay. Three minutes of perpetual motion, and just before timer went off he landed a solid punch to Clay’s chest and felt a sensation he’d never felt—density, malleable yet impenetrable; something that resisted battering, hardened under the pressure of intense heat. Like clay.

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Paws stood at the end of the alley letting the train's vibration massage his muscles. He crossed the street, stopped at the stone wall and looked up the hill at St. John the Baptist. He was tired; not from the three rounds he'd just boxed with a former welterweight contender, but from altering his life around losers whose manhood depended on size of their posse. He double-timed up the stone steps to the metal sculpture of a Philadelphia soft pretzel and headed for the exit that led to school. He didn't think to change direction when he noticed a small group of kids passing a brown paper bag on the side of the path, not even when they turned their heads his way.

“Hey, j-jerkoff!”

The voice sounded familiar, yet the thought of sprinting to the safety of the St. John exit never crossed his mind.

“I'm talking to you p-p-pussy boy.”

The only sign that Paws heard the slur was the slight cupping of his hands, and he didn't look up until someone walked over and blocked his way. The kid had a couple of inches on him, and was heavier than when he broke his nose two years ago.

“What are you deaf, faggot?” Paws stared at him but didn't answer, infuriating the kid. He wound up and pushed, but Paws shifted his shoulders and barely lost any ground. Fire raged in the kid's eyes. “You think your tough, faggot?” he spit. He raised his hands and shoved again, but Paws weaved and let the backpack slide from his shoulder. He turned and faced his accoster, began to sway, slowly at first, then wider, deeper.

“Don't mess with me!” the kid threatened.

“Hit him,” one of his friends edged him on. “Yeah, break his nose again,” said another, and they all laughed.

“Last chance, asshole. Get out of my park before I kick your ass.”

Paws tightened his fists and raised them to the side of his head. Coach’s words whispered to him, *step into a jab, snap your fist, aim high like the other guy’s bigger than you*. He bobbed from side to side, lowered his hands shoulder-high, and when he stuck out his chin the kid threw a wild right. Paws’ head disappeared and the kid’s momentum carried him to a crack in the pavement where he tripped, fell and struck his face against the cement. *Balance*, he said to himself. Fists chin-high, Paws eyed each of the kid’s friends. None of them moved or said a word.

The big kid haggardly propped himself onto all fours, and by the time he looked up, Paws had already passed through an opening his friends made for him.

The End